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Disability Simulations as a Teaching Tool: Some Ethical Issues and Implications

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Abstract

The paper focuses on some of the major ethical issues involved when employing disability simulations as a teaching tool in college-level courses on individuals with disabilities. These issues include: (a) the importance of maximizing the authenticity of the simulation experience; (b) the need to confront situations in which the simulation experience leads to increased discouragement on the part of some student participants; (c) the necessity for faculty members to recognize and fulfill various obligations to students, to the host institution, and to the larger community if disability simulations are conducted as required course exercises; and (d) the need to convince students of the relevance of disability simulations to their own lives, and to the larger society. The substance of the paper is derived mainly from personal reflections of the author regarding his experiences in conducting disability simulation exercises in college-level courses dealing with people with disabilities and disability-related issues.

As a college professor, a sociologist, and a legally totally blind individual, I have found the idea of disability simulations to be inherently interesting. I not only have employed this technique in everyday life with acquaintances who "simply have wanted to see what it's like to be blind," but I have also employed the technique more systematically in several teaching endeavors.

The first of these more systematic efforts occurred in two college-level courses that I recently taught concerning persons with disabilities and disability-related issues. In each of these courses, the nature and consequences of a variety of disabilities were explored, including visual, hearing, and mobility impairments. Special emphasis was placed upon the many physical, psychological, and social barriers that individuals with disabilities face in everyday life generally, and in specific institutional settings such as schools and the work place.

As a means of facilitating an appreciation for these barriers, all students in the course were required to participate in a major disability simulation activity. Specifically, students were instructed to pair off into teams that would work together as functional units for the duration of the simulation exercise which typically lasted from four to six

hours. During the first half of the exercise, one team member assumed a disability of his/her choice, while the other team member served as an assistant. For the second half of the exercise, team members reversed roles. Even though one of the goals of the simulation exercise clearly was for team members to gain a common joint understanding of what it means to have a disability and of the general dynamics involved in assisting someone with a disability, it was hoped that each team member also would gain a concrete understanding of his/her chosen disabling condition by virtue of having spent several hours simulating that disability.

The disabilities that were simulated during this particular exercise, and the strategies through which the simulations were conducted were as follows:

1. Different degrees of blindness or visual impairment--participants utilized various kinds of low-vision eye glasses to simulate partial blindness, or a cloth blindfold to simulate total blindness.
2. Hearing impairment- Participants plugged their ears with ear plugs similar to those used by swimmers.
3. Various kinds of mobility impairments:

d. Not having the use of an arm- Participants put their dominant arm into a cloth sling.
e. Having difficulty in walking because of a serious leg injury- Participants walked while using crutches or a wooden splint.
f. Experiencing a more severe mobility impairment involving at least partial paralysis- Participants used a wheelchair for an extended period of time.

Throughout the entire simulation exercise, students were urged to conduct as many everyday life activities as possible. Such activities included going to class, preparing and eating meals, getting dressed, washing or bathing, and going shopping or running other kinds of errands. At the conclusion of the exercise, students shared their experiences and their own reflections upon those experiences with the class as a whole in both verbal and written form.

The second of my efforts to systematically employ the technique of disability simulation as a teaching tool took place during the Spring and Summer of 1990. On two separate occasions, I had the opportunity to work with a select group of college-age students who helped design and carry out a dramatic role-playing program that was eventually entitled "Disabilities Inside Out." The program was presented to two campus audiences and was quite well received.

The basic goal of this program was to build on a theme that appeared in a very creatively done film entitled *What to do when you meet a blind person?* (American Foundation for the Blind, 1971.) Although it is dated, the film contains a number of scenes which illustrate various frustrating situations that a person without sight often encounters as he/she interacts with others in the everyday social arena. The participating student volunteers re-enacted several of the scenes as closely as possible. Additional interactive scenes not appearing in the film also were created and incorporated into the program in

order to depict other situations that I personally have encountered at various points in my life.

Brief summaries of selected dramatic scenes from this program follow:

1. A person who is blind walks down the street; a passerby assumes that this person is helpless and automatically helps without asking, thus creating an awkward situation.
2. A person who is blind meets a friend who walks and talks with him normally as they go into a restaurant for lunch. Several uncomfortable situations occur due to the uneasiness and awkwardness of other customers and the restaurant staff. The person who is blind and his friend persist and illustrate how to overcome such situations.
3. The person who is blind goes on two hypothetical job interviews.

a. Negative interview- The interview exemplifies an approach that clearly involves prejudice and probably discrimination against the applicant who is blind. Inappropriate questions and concerns are raised and the applicant is made to feel he/ she is being interviewed to fulfill affirmative action guidelines.
b. Positive interview- The applicant who is blind is much more readily accepted for whom he/she really is. Attention throughout the interview is focused upon how the applicant feels he/she can contribute to the company, and thereby be an effective employee. When the issue of special accommodations arises, it is discussed in an atmosphere of mutual support and cooperation.

As I reflect back upon these various efforts at disability simulation, two observations come readily to mind. These observations have grown out of the verbal and written comments of those who have participated in the disability simulations, my own perceptions of the experiences of the simulation participants, and my personal experiences as an individual with a disability.

First, it seems as though two kinds of experiences have been involved in my efforts to simulate disabilities. They are:

1. The direct personal experience: The participant experiences the disability and its associated aspects as fully as possible over an extended period of time; and
2. The more indirect and passive experience: The individual observes purposely constructed and role-played everyday interactive situations, and sees the typical responses of others in the mainstream of society to the hypothetical person with a disability in those situations.

The second and perhaps more important of my observations centers around the fact that the use of disability simulations as a teaching tool in courses on people with disabilities clearly involves a number of major ethical issues. Some of the more important among these major ethical issues of concern will now be noted briefly. (See Kiger (1992) for additional discussion pertaining to a number of these ethical issues, and for an overview of several theoretical, methodological, and ethical issues that might need more systematic attention in future efforts to conduct disability simulations.)

1. To what extent can a disability simulation be "real"? - i.e., how might we give a student the most genuine experience possible, and how might the realness or authenticity of a simulation experience be heightened?

I believe that the answer to these questions varies according to the kind of simulation that is being employed. My own personal experiences and the thoughts and reflections of student participants suggest that the direct personal experiential simulation is most helpful when it comes to demonstrating the various physical aspects of a particular disability, and the physical barriers encountered by such a person in everyday life situations.

However, in demonstrating the social and psychological barriers which people with disabilities also must confront, the direct personal experiential simulation may be less effective. This loss of effectiveness may simply be due to the tendency for the student participant with the disabling condition to become overly engrossed in the physical aspects of coping with the disability, thereby short-changing the social-psychological realities.of simulation, the interaction that occurs can be closely controlled and monitored by the simulation creator thereby eliciting specific social-psychological processes and attitudinal thought patterns that are known to occur as people with disabilities and the nondisabled interact.

It seems reasonable that perhaps the best and most effective simulation experience in a course on individuals with disabilities might take the form of a combination of both types of simulations. The mechanics of devising and conducting such a joint simulation exercise obviously would be quite complex, but the end product could be quite rewarding and instructive.

2. What might be done in those cases where a student perceives a disability simulation to be extremely discouraging or even hopeless? How might this air of discouragement or hopelessness be confronted to prevent the formation of increasingly negative future attitudes or orientations toward people with actual disabilities?

This ethical concern appears to be equally applicable to both types of disability simulations. Fortunately, however, any serious feelings of discouragement or hopelessness can be counteracted relatively easily, with planning and foresight on the part of the course instructor. The simulation activities should be followed as quickly as possible by an array of positive examples of successful coping strategies on the part of individuals with disabilities. One possible source of positive examples is films or other audio-visual presentations. Many such audio-visual materials do exist, and are readily available to educators (see references for examples). An even better source of positive role models is clearly individuals with disabilities themselves. Many have succeeded in coming to terms with their disability, and are quite willing to serve as guest classroom speakers.

3. If disability simulations are conducted as a required course exercise, what are the professor's ethical obligations to the students, to the host college or university, and to the larger community? How might these obligations best be realized?

A. Obligations to the students- It seems clear that, no matter what kinds of disability simulations are used, and no matter how such simulations are conducted, obligations to our students as human subjects must be remembered. In general, these obligations can be summarized in what might be called "the golden rule of social research": "Treat your subjects as you yourself would want to be treated as a human subject in a research study."

A more concrete representation of the elements of this "golden rule of social research" can be found in relevant sections of the 1980 Revised Code of Ethics of the American Sociological Association (Bailey, 1982, pp. 511-517). For example, Part 1, Section E of the Code stresses the importance of respecting the rights of human subjects. Although a number of specific rights are discussed within this section, two of them are particularly noteworthy in relation to disability simulations. First, human subjects are entitled to rights of privacy and dignity of treatment (Bailey, 1982, pp. 435-436,514). In addition, care always must be taken to obtain the full informed consent of subjects (Bailey, 1982, p. Not only should subjects be informed about the potential for any harm or risk that such simulations might entail, but they also should be given the ability to choose the kind of simulation in which they would like to participate. This ability to choose the nature of their simulation experience enables subjects themselves to determine the kinds of potential harm or risk to which they will be exposed, and allows them to participate in the simulation exercise in a way that personally is most meaningful to them. (The level of potential harm or risk that is associated with direct personal experience simulation can be reduced markedly via the 'learn work" approach which was described. Through such an approach, participants would be able to monitor and assist each other very closely during the entire simulation activity.)

B. Obligations to the host college or university- lt is incumbent upon a faculty member who is conducting disability simulations to inform appropriate college or university officials of his/ her plans. The specific college or university officials who would need to be informed will vary, of course, from one institution to another. As long as plenty of time is allowed for this informational process to occur, the most important bases can be covered with relatively little difficulty.

C. Obligations to the larger community- Finally, it seems that the faculty member's obligations with regard to conducting disability simulations do not necessarily end with the host college or university. I have found that the most effective and realistic way to fulfill this last set of obligations is to give each student participant a copy of an official cover letter from me, which can be shown to anyone who expresses concerns or misgivings about the exercise. The cover letter simply outlines the nature and goals of the simulation activity, and requests cooperation in the endeavor to the extent that such cooperation is possible.

4. How do you convince students of the relevance or significance of disability simulations to their own everyday lives, and to the larger society as a whole?

Convincing students of the relevance or significance of disability simulations is a relatively simple task. Perhaps the best way to start is to constantly remind students of the potential or actual relevance of disability simulations to them personally. It should be pointed out that anyone could have a disability at some point in life. This becomes especially apparent when considering the wide variety of disabilities (e.g., commonly recognized disabilities such as blindness, deafness, mobility impairments, and speech impairments; less obvious disabilities such as temporary injuries, learning disabilities, and mental illness).

With the help of disability simulations, emphasis also can be placed on the idea that the biggest obstacle to an individual with a disability often is not the disabling condition itself, but the negative attitudes that surround the condition. These negative attitudes, on the part of nondisabled persons and even individuals with disabilities in some instances, appear to be among the most important barriers that must be confronted if a better quality of life is to be enjoyed by citizens with disabilities. If such negative attitudes are not tackled, but instead are left unchecked, they could result in the continuation of harmful self-fulfilling prophecies with related detrimental effects. The detrimental effects of these self-fulfilling prophecies are long-lasting and well-known. They not only can involve damage to persons with disabilities by denying them opportunities to participate fully in the mainstream of social life, but they also can involve negative implications for the entire society as well due to the needless waste of much human talent, energy, and capital.

Conclusion

In this article, an attempt has been made to offer some suggestions for effectively conducting various kinds of disability simulations in college-level courses dealing with individuals with disabilities and disability-related issues. An effort also have been made to summarize, and offer possible solutions to, a number of important ethical issues that clearly become involved in employing the disability simulation technique as a teaching tool. The ideas presented here are based solely upon the author's personal experiences, and upon his interpretations of the experiences of his students who have engaged in disability simulations. It remains for future scientific research to determine the true validity of these observations.

In addition, even though disability simulations have been portrayed in a highly favorable fashion throughout this paper, a few qualifications or words of caution are in order. It also is probably not reasonable to expect disability simulation experiences to be a panacea for the larger societal problems of prejudice and discrimination against people with disabilities.

Nevertheless, these precautionary observations should not be taken as evidence of a total lack of benefits associated with the disability simulation teaching technique. Benefits do

exist, and can be very real for participants. As these more qualitative accounts suggest, disability simulations certainly can play an active role in at least causing participants to question their present attitudes and value orientations toward disabilities and individuals with disabilities. Simulations also can help the nondisabled reevaluate their everyday interactive encounters with individuals with disabilities, and thereby become more empathetic in their dealings with them in future interactive situations (Kiger, 1992; Wilson & Alcorn, 1969). Finally, as asserted by Kiger (1992), "if nothing else, disability simulations can create a positive discourse about persons with disabilities and societal reactions" (p. 76).

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